

Back Again, Back Again: To Catch a Laerd

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty two: To Catch a Laerd.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyas: *How do we catch a laerd?* I'd asked.

Leander had been the one to answer. *With shimmer.*

They'd used an interesting word - *roreala* - that was something between *shine* and *sunlight* and *golden glow*. The idea was - *charisma*, but not the smiles-and-sharp-teeth kind. The kind that made you believe in a better tomorrow.

Aesthetics were essential to a mission like this one - if you did not look like the story you were selling, you were dead in the water before you'd even begun. The laerds relied on *roreala* to maintain power. The people relied on *roreala* to maintain peace. Cassian relied on *roreala* - that was every ride

he'd ever taken through the city, every presentation we'd made at that stupid fucking poets festival, the paintings of us he'd passed out as wanted posters and the bodies he burned to remind the people of his strength. It was harder to begin a war if your entity seemed a behemoth. If you were trying to bring down a castle, chipping away for cracks seemed too impossible to even try.

But we'd burned down the castle. We'd found each other. We were not experts in destruction, but we were no longer strangers to what it took to make those kinds of fractures. We could do it. We'd done it before.

So — we set out, Callia and Leander and I and a friend each — Rhia came, Iolo came, Haast did, despite it all. We brought whatever supplies we could spare and checked in on all the inner workings of democracy before stepping out — the *fretim*, thank the gods, did not rely on Callia and Callia alone. It was, to its credit, to its care, a network and a political body and a string of people too tied together by hope to want to bring it down for their own interest. They could manage. They did not need Callia in order to manage.

For us, though, to give the *fretim* enough of an in, we had to build ourselves a legend first. Our own kind of *roreala*.

The first tavern we strode into was half-empty. The sun had gone down some time ago — the Longest Night was fast

approaching, and although it did not get too cold ever, sunset came early and sank fast and made gathering the effort to leave home hard. A half-empty tavern was not a fantastic start to our roreala – it was hardly more than nothing, even if it was easily excused by the season.

It was, however, better to start small than to not start at all.

We went in the six of us, cloaks pulled over our best clothing and the gold paint streaked across our faces hidden by hoods. Callia and I went to the bar to talk to the tavernkeep, Leander went to a back corner to pull their instrument free. Rhia and Iolo settled themselves in among the crowd and Haast – despite Iolo's sort-of-unsubtle gesturing, hovered a few steps off Callia's other shoulder.

This is in the land of Laerd Ocella Llanura, asked Callia, hood still drawn.

The tavernkeep frowned, appraising Callia – clean hands, leather armor and ranger's clothes peeking out from beneath her cloak. *Who's asking?*

In the corner, Leander finished tuning their lyre and strummed a hesitant opening cord. Callia grinned, sharp, corners of her mouth daring anyone to look away. *Your poet.*

Song poured from their mouth - slow, the same way it always started. *I do know how this will end*, they began. *With one of us crowned and one of us dead.*

Rex et poeta et soldat. You know this one, listeners. The song grew, because this was what they were good at, drawing people in, making them listen - and this was Rhysea, and a tavern in the winter months, so of course there was another bard in the back corner that knew the song and knew the story and took it up, too, layering their voice over Leander's and pulling them up onto the table.

It wasn't a celebration. It wasn't like any other time I'd heard them sing, everyone already halfway to drunk and more than happy to turn any bit of hope into a party. But - there it was, there it was, that soft gentle glow that promised *something bigger, something greater.* A future that you didn't have to fear as it barreled towards you.

Rhia took up the song. I could pick her voice out of a thousand. Iolo did, too, and she was followed by the two men at the table next to theirs, hands snaking out to find each other.

I forgot Callia was beside me until I felt her pinkie hook through mine. Her face was how I'd always thought mine looked, watching Leander sing. We were mirrors, whatever scorn or fear that kept the thing with feathers in our souls protected gone for as long as the song lasted. Her eyes were wide, not

half-slitted shut as one more shield. *I can't doubt them*, she seemed to want to say. *Not like this. Not when this is who they are.*

What she said instead was, *our turn, eligidida*. But there wasn't any scorn to it this time. Just – quiet endearment. Those wide eyes glittered and she caught the rest of my fingers, giving my hand a quick tug before stepping forward.

We took off our cloaks. Leander turned towards us, all performance, and said – *and wouldn't you know it? Here they are.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around.

Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.